

# General practice research and research skill needs

## Attitudes of GP supervisors

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### BACKGROUND

General practice research is an important learning area in general practice registrar training. General practitioner supervisors have a central role in registrar training. Registrar training in Tasmania has the added component of a research project. Little is known about supervisors' research attitudes, confidence to support registrar research projects, and research skill needs.

### METHOD

A postal survey was sent to all 40 GP supervisors with General Practice Training Tasmania.

### RESULTS

Response rate was 90% (n=36): 33% were interested in becoming involved in general practice research; 53% wanted to improve their research skills; and 55% did not feel confident supporting a registrar with a research project. Those supervisors who were confident were more likely to have previous research involvement.

### DISCUSSION

There is potential for increasing research capacity in GP supervisors. It is important to build the confidence of supervisors in their support of general practice registrars engaged in research projects.

**The past decade has seen increased research capacity building in primary health care in Australia.<sup>1</sup> This capacity building has spread into general practice registrar training with the development of research skills becoming an important learning area. This is evident by the inclusion of 'critical thinking and research' as a core component of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Training Program Curriculum<sup>2</sup> and the creation of advanced academic general practice training posts for general practice registrars.<sup>3</sup> General Practice Training Tasmania (GPTT) is one of the few registrar training providers to have included a compulsory research project during training, as required by the current RACGP Training Program Curriculum.<sup>2</sup>**

General practitioner supervisors (also known as GP trainers) are the GPs responsible for the in practice teaching, support and supervision of general practice registrars undertaking Australian General Practice Training (AGPT).<sup>4</sup> They are expected to play an important role in encouraging the application of critical thinking and research skills in training posts.<sup>2</sup> The RACGP Training Program Curriculum states that

it is important for supervisors and other registrar trainers to have a well developed understanding of critical thinking and research. In Tasmania, the supervisor's role includes supporting registrars to complete their small research project. GPTT encourages registrars to discuss the research question and project feasibility with their supervisor. In addition, research mentors with academic experience are assigned to each registrar.

Despite general practice research output being lower than other disciplines,<sup>5</sup> there is some evidence that Australian GPs would like to increase their research involvement.<sup>6,7</sup> A survey by Silagy et al<sup>6</sup> showed that 34% of GP respondents had interest in becoming involved in general practice research and a further 38% had a moderate interest. The response rate of this survey was only 35% however, and its findings may have been biased toward those interested in research. The researchers found that factors that had a statistically significant association with level of interest in research included involvement in postgraduate teaching and prior experience with research. It was unclear from the paper whether GPs with postgraduate teaching experience were synonymous with GP supervisors. Askew et al<sup>7</sup> showed that 84% of GPs

surveyed had a positive attitude to research with 29% wanting more involvement.<sup>7</sup> There is a paucity of research published specifically about GP supervisors' attitudes to GP research, their research skill needs, and the potential to build research capacity. This study aimed to address these issues.

## Method

A one page questionnaire was developed by the research team. An administrative assistant mailed the survey to all 40 Tasmanian GP supervisors and co-supervisors on GPTT's database in April 2006. Nonresponders were followed up with two mail outs, 2 weeks apart. The survey collected data on: age, gender, current supervision status, awareness of the compulsory registrar research project, confidence supporting a registrar with a research project, previous research experience, attitudes to GP research, interest in research involvement, interest in improving research skills, and self perceived research skill gaps. The de-identified survey data was analysed by the researchers in SPSS version 13.0 using simple frequency analysis.

Ethics approval was granted from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, University of Tasmania.

## Results

The overall response rate was 90% (n=36). Most respondents were aged 36–50 years (69%, 25/36) with the remainder in the 51–65 year age group. They were predominantly male (88%, 29/33). Eighty-six percent of respondents (30/35) were currently supervising or co-supervising a general practice registrar. *Table 1* shows the GP supervisor responses to research attitudes and research skill needs.

Over half of respondents wanted to improve their research skills (53%, 19/36). The two most popular topics for research training were 'research methods' and 'qualitative research'. Training sessions about gaining funding, statistics, research proposal writing, literature searching, ethics approval were requested by some respondents.

Seventy-three percent (22/30) of current GP supervisors were aware of the compulsory research project component of general practice training. Within this group, 55% (12/22) had held

**Table 1. GP supervisor responses to research attitudes (n=36)**

	Response n (%)
Believe general practice research is important	36 (100%)
Previously have participated in a research project	12 (33%)
Would like to become involved in general practice research	12 (33%)
May consider becoming involved in general practice research	13 (36%)
Would like to improve research skills	19 (53%)
Would like to be an investigator in general practice research	8 (22%)

**Table 2. Comparison of responses between GP supervisors with previous research involvement and supervisors with no previous involvement**

	Previous involvement	No previous involvement n (%)
Confidence in supporting registrar with research project		
Confident	9/11 (82%)	6/22 (27%)
Not confident	2/11 (18%)	16/22 (73%)
Involvement in future general practice research		
Yes	7/12 (58%)	5/24 (21%)
No	3/12 (25%)	8/24 (33%)
Unsure	2/12 (17%)	11/24 (46%)
Interested in becoming an investigator in research	4/12 (33%)	4/21 (19%)

a specific discussion with their registrar about their project. Fifty-five percent of supervisors (18/33) were not confident supporting a registrar with a research project and 33% (12/36) had previous research involvement. *Table 2* shows the comparison of supervisor responses according to previous research participation.

## Discussion

Our finding that Tasmanian GP supervisors have a positive attitude to general practice research is supported by other surveys of the general GP population that show the majority of GPs believe general practice research is important.<sup>7,8</sup> Supervisors' level of interest in becoming involved in general practice research is very similar to the survey of the general GP population reported by Silagy et al.<sup>6</sup>

The result that just over half of GP supervisors wanted to improve their research skills is an important point to consider. We thought this level of interest in improving research skills was quite good despite having no comparable data within the GP population. Exploring their motivation to build research skills would be interesting. We speculate that GP supervisors may be interested

in improving research skills because they do not feel confident in their current skill level.

Comparing the responses between GP supervisors with previous research experience to no previous experience (*Table 2*) demonstrated that previous experience is significantly related to having more confidence assisting registrars with their research projects. GPTT currently overcomes the lack of research skills and confidence in some GP supervisors by assigning academic mentors to assist registrars with research projects.

Supervisors with previous research experience were more likely to want involvement in general practice research in the future (*Table 2*). Supervisors with no previous research experience were more likely to answer 'unsure' or 'no' to further involvement. Training programs may need to be aware that supervisors without prior research experience may still be interested in becoming investigators in general practice research. There were four such supervisors in our survey.

The high response rate makes this a useful exploratory study of the research attitudes and skill needs among GP supervisors in Tasmania. Study limitations include the narrow sample

population and that the study was commissioned and performed by the training organisation to which the GP supervisors are contracted.

Supervisors' research capacity may be enhanced by recognising their potential interest and improving their research skills. In Tasmania, the compulsory general practice registrar research project component may have the added benefit of exposing the GP supervisor directly to research in their practice. This survey supports the need for supervisors to have research skills training, especially those supervisors without previous research experience. This could be included in any GP supervisor training curriculum.

### Implications for general practice

- Research training is a core part of the general practice training curriculum.
- GP supervisors without previous research experience may need assistance and resources to support their registrars with research projects.
- There is scope for building GP supervisors' research capacity by recognising their potential interest in research and improving their research skills.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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